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## **Kantian Transcendental Pessimism and Jamesian Empirical Meliorism**

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### **Abstract**

Kant's philosophy was an important background for the pragmatist tradition, even though some of the major classical pragmatists, especially William James, were unwilling to acknowledge their debt to Kant. This essay considers the relation between Kant and James from the perspective of their conceptions of the human condition. In particular, I examine their shared pessimism, employing Vanden Auweele's (2019) recent analysis of Kant's pessimism and arguing that this is required by James's meliorism (which is put forward as a middle-ground option between optimism and pessimism). A comparative inquiry into Kant's and James's views on the relation between ethics and religion is provided against this background of their shared philosophical anthropology.

### **Keywords**

James, Kant, meliorism, pessimism, religion

### **Abstrakti**

Kantin filosofia toimi tärkeänä vaikuttimena pragmatistiselle traditiolle, vaikka moni klassinen pragmatisti, William James erityisesti, ei ollut halukas tunnustamaan velkaansa Kantille. Artikkelissa tarkastellaan Kantin ja Jamesin ajattelun välistä suhdetta heidän ihmisyyttä koskevien

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käsitystensä kautta. Tarkastelen erityisesti heidän pessimismiään soveltamalla Vanden Auweleen (2019) tuoretta analyysiä Kantin pessimismistä, jota pidän välttämättömänä Jamesin meliorismille (jonka esitän optimismin ja pessimismin välimuotona). Vertailen tätä taustaa vasten Kantin ja Jamesin näkemyksiä etiikan ja uskonnon välisestä suhteesta.

### Asiasanat

James, Kant, meliorismi, pessimismi, uskonto

### Introduction: transcendental pragmatism

This paper examines the controversial relation between Immanuel Kant and William James, one of the founders of American pragmatism. While James famously, or notoriously, claimed philosophy to have progressed not “*through*” but “*round*” Kant from British empiricism to “the point where now we stand” (that is, presumably, his own pragmatism), respecting the “English spirit” as intellectually, practically, and morally “*saner*”, “*sounder*”, and “*truer*” than Kant’s (James 1978 [1898], pp. 138-139), a number of scholars have compellingly shown how profoundly Kantian many of James’s own ideas were – and how deeply Kantian the pragmatism he co-established thus more generally is.<sup>1</sup> The details concerning the complex relationship between Kant and James remain controversial for interpreters of both philosophers and for historians of pragmatism, but at an abstract meta-level it is relatively easy to identify important analogies between the two thinkers, despite James’s (at times arguably somewhat exaggerated) hostility toward Kantian apriorism and the heavy “German” style of philosophizing generally, which he seems to have considered a clear manifestation of a kind of “intellectualism” foreign to practical human life and its real concerns.

Let me, in an introductory fashion, indicate some of Kant’s and James’s most significant points of agreement. First, in theoretical philosophy, especially epistemology and metaphysics, James shares what we may call Kant’s *constructivism*, at least in spirit if not in every detail of letter: the empirical world experienceable and knowable by human beings does not come to us as “ready-made” or “given”, equipped with “its own” pre-categorized metaphysical structure, but is shaped by our cognitive capacities – not, to be

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Bird 1986; Carlson 1997; Pihlström 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2020; as well as several contributions to Skowronski and Pihlström 2019.

sure, by a fixed and unchanging set of twelve categories of the understanding (according to James) but by our on-going and constantly critically revised *practices* of inquiry. That is, we cannot (and should not imagine that we can) know “things as they are in themselves” (*Dinge an sich selbst*) but only things that have to a considerable degree been structured by us, albeit obviously not created by us *ex nihilo*.<sup>2</sup> Some of the best Jamesian pronouncements of this general (quasi-Kantian) constructivism are Lectures II and VII of his *Pragmatism* (James 1975 [1907]), dealing with the pragmatic method and the metaphysical dependence of “things” on our purposes and interests, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, in practical philosophy (ethics) and the philosophy of religion, James, while of course firmly rejecting Kantian strict rationalist deontology in favor of a more experimental, non-apriorist, and non-foundationalist ethical approach,<sup>4</sup> can be interpreted as having come up with a way of postulating God’s reality (and possibly human immortality) in a way strikingly resembling Kant’s (1783 [1788]) famous “postulates of practical reason”. There is no way we could metaphysically or theoretically speaking *know* anything about God (or any other transcendent metaphysical and theological matters, including things in themselves), but our ethical orientation to life may nevertheless necessitate a theistic postulation, because otherwise we could not be coherently committed to what the moral law requires us to commit ourselves to, i.e., the highest good (*summum bonum*), the eventual harmony of moral virtue and happiness. For Kant as much as James, it may therefore be *ethically necessary* to have faith in Gods<sup>5</sup> – though it must also be kept in mind that James’s God is a finite God, not the single over-arching absolute divinity of traditional theism.

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the denial of any human construction of the world *ex nihilo*, it is clear that both Kant and James are in some basic pre-philosophical sense realists: both maintain that there is something out there that we did not make up. It is better to speak about our “structuring” reality into a human shape than about our “constructing” reality, as the latter phrase has too radically constructivist connotations.

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, I have tried to interpret these key formulations of pragmatism and/or pragmatic constructivism as attempts to argue that our metaphysical “structuring” of the world is always also ethical, i.e., that there is no way in which ethical considerations could be eliminated from our metaphysical theorizing. See, e.g., Pihlström 2009, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> For James’s single most important essay on ethics, see “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891) in James 1979 [1897]; Marchetti (2015) provides one of the most insightful readings of this Jamesian text.

<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that James would have no difficulty in agreeing with the Kantian idea that “practical necessity can bequeath necessary, practical reality” to concepts that remain problematic from the point of view of theoretical reason, such as “the practical reality of autonomy” as well as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (Vanden Auweele 2019, pp. 54-55). See, e.g., James 1985 [1902], Lecture III. This issue concerning our commitment to the practical reality of the object of religious faith will also be relevant to the considerations of the final substantial section of this essay.

In terms of Kant's three famous questions – “What can I know?”, “What ought I to do?”, “What am I entitled to hope?”, presented toward the end of the first *Critique* (Kant 1990 [1781/1787], A805/B833; see also, e.g., James 1977 [1911], chapter 2) – James is therefore a semi-Kantian thinker at least with respect to knowledge (we can only know a world that is to a great extent a result of our own structuring activity, albeit a more pluralistic and malleable one than Kant had maintained) and hope (we can legitimately hope that there is God, or that there are at least some kind of superhuman forces concerned with the “salvation” of the world, and that we might have an immortal life, though again there is much more plurality in the ways in which these beliefs are construed from the Jamesian pragmatic point of view in comparison to Kant's). Moreover, even though the ethical question concerning what we ought to do is the one where the two philosophers are perhaps most obviously divided, the meta-level idea that religion and theology should be based on ethics rather than vice versa is something they deeply share. There is a sense in which ethics, for both Kant and James, comes first and orients our entire philosophical investigation, no matter what we are inquiring in philosophically, and therefore their profound agreement in ethics cannot be located in the *content* of ethical theory.<sup>6</sup> In particular, metaphysics (including the metaphysics of theism, or religious metaphysics generally) must be grounded in ethics, rather than the other way round (cf. Pihlström 2009, 2013).<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, James's ethics, despite his tendency (as a pragmatist) to assume some form of consequentialism according to which the outcome of our actions is what ethically matters, is “Kantian” in the sense that we must be fundamentally committed to taking seriously other individuals' perspectives, against a “certain kind of blindness” to the inner worth of others and a deafness to the “cries of the wounded” that we constantly hear

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, in a sense James rejects the very idea of ethical theory (cf. again Marchetti 2015); this is a clear difference between the two philosophers, as Kant formulated one of the most important theories in the history of ethics.

<sup>7</sup> It is notoriously difficult to determine what exactly Kant means by “metaphysics” and in what sense, if any, he is (still) committed to a metaphysical project in the critical philosophy. For an excellent discussion, see Koistinen 2012.

around us.<sup>8</sup> In fact, I will in the following suggest that this yields a key *metaethical*<sup>9</sup> similarity between Kant and James.

It may be proposed that whereas Kant's philosophy is generally known as *transcendental idealism*, James's version of pragmatism – despite his rejection of Kant's a priori transcendental method and some of the scornful remarks he makes about the use of the transcendentalist vocabulary – can be labeled *transcendental pragmatism* (see Pihlström 2003, 2009). This is above all because human practices, driven by our natural needs, interests, and purposes, provide a quasi-transcendental framework within which knowledge as well as moral deliberation are so much as possible. James as much as Kant is investigating the *necessary conditions for the possibility of things we take for granted*; he just (unlike Kant) locates such conditions in our constantly changing, historically transforming, and always reinterpretable human practices rather than any permanent ahistorical structures of our cognitive capacity. Another reason why this practice-oriented view is not very far from Kant's general position is that according to Kant practical reason is ultimately “prior to” theoretical philosophy: even in its theoretical use, human reason is guided by the practical (moral) interest. James could not agree more profoundly about this idea.

In the present essay, I will argue for James's fundamental Kantianism by moving around these more familiar comparative discussions, however. It seems to me that several earlier contributions to the interpretation of Kant and James (among them possibly some of my own works) have already taken some steps toward demonstrating how deeply Kantian James's pragmatic constructivism and his ethically grounded conception of religion are, insofar as a pluralistic “softening” of the original Kantian transcendental framework is regarded as a serious option (which, clearly, many Kantians would not do). I will, instead, move right through the theme that in my view unites Kant and James at the most fundamental level – that is, *philosophical anthropology*.<sup>10</sup> After all, Kant maintained

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<sup>8</sup> These phrases come from “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (in James 1983 [1899]) and “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891, in James 1979 [1897]), respectively.

<sup>9</sup> By using this word I am not indicating that either Kant or James would have made a clear distinction between metaethics and (normative) ethics as contemporary ethical theorists tend to do. Rather, a kind of meta-level reflection on what ethics is – what constitutes a genuinely moral point of view – runs through these philosophers' ethical writings; moreover, an ethical reflection seems to be constantly present through their *entire* writing.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also my explorations of pragmatic yet transcendental philosophical anthropology in Pihlström 2016.

that his three questions can be summarized as the single question, “What is man?”, and it is precisely this question that James, as a kind of “transcendental humanist”, is also trying to answer (cf. also Carlson 1997). I will suggest that these two philosophers’ many similarities are basically a corollary of their shared conception of humanity, which can, perhaps contrary to some expectations, be regarded as *pessimistic* in an important sense.<sup>11</sup> After having devoted the bulk of this paper for a comparison of Kant’s and James’s (ethical and religious) pessimisms and meliorisms, I will add some final remarks on their shared commitment to *critical philosophy*.

### **Jamesian meliorism**

Our reception of both Kant and James has, I believe, suffered from overly optimistic readings that may make them seem less sophisticated thinkers than they really were. Kant is often portrayed as a rationalist Enlightenment optimist who despite his faith in reason brings God back into his transcendental system through a backdoor, while James may be seen as a “positive thinker” inspiring (famously) not only the philosophy of life employed at Alcoholics Anonymous but positivity- and happiness-focused self-help more generally, including the theology of wealth and flourishing.<sup>12</sup> This is in my view seriously wrong and needs correction.

I have tried to argue on earlier occasions that James’s pragmatic method should actually be characterized as a “negative” method in the sense that it primarily focuses on the potential ethically problematic effects of our concepts and conceptions that are to be pragmatically examined (see Pihlström 2013, 2014, 2020). I now wish to draw attention to some new scholarly work on Kant emphasizing *his* negative and pessimistic conception of the human being. For my comparison of James and Kant, I will particularly use Dennis Vanden Auweele’s very interesting book, *Pessimism in Kant’s Ethics and Rational Religion* (2019), because his interpretation is unique in its emphasis on Kant’s

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<sup>11</sup> I have previously (Pihlström 2008) suggested that for James “empirical meliorism” is based on “transcendental pessimism”, but at that stage I did not realize how crucial a certain kind of pessimism is for Kant himself.

<sup>12</sup> Note, by the way, that the analogy to recovery from alcoholism is not irrelevant even in relation to Kant, who compares our tendency to be tied up with evil to alcoholism; see Kant 1983 [1793/1794], 6:28n; cf. Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 21. Regarding James’s influence on positive thinking with a conservative Christian twist, Norman Vincent Peale’s inspiration by James has sometimes been mentioned (I am grateful to Ken Stickers for this information).

pessimism.<sup>13</sup> Not only Kant's conception of the limits of human reason (on the side of theoretical philosophy) but also, and more importantly, his rejection of theodicies and his account of radical evil (on the practical philosophy side) are key elements of what may be regarded as his pessimism – a humanistic version of pessimism that deserves to be taken seriously also in a Jamesian pragmatist context.

This is a form of pessimism that need not, however, destroy our ability to be good – either epistemically or ethically. Rather, it is a way of taking seriously our true human predicament in its epistemic, ethical, and existential fragility. I believe this is something that unites Kant and James at a fundamental level, and therefore Kantian pessimism needs attention in this context.

Pessimism here needs to be understood as a *transcendental* ground for the very possibility of our being and doing good – of our striving for a better world, again both epistemically and ethically – to the extent that we can claim a kind of transcendental pessimism and empirical meliorism to be firmly integrated in James (cf., e.g., Pihlström 2008). Kant's pessimistic account of the human being arguably plays a crucial role in any pragmatist development of transcendental philosophy. At a meta-level, this interplay of pessimism and meliorism should make us rethink the philosophical anthropology at the background of both Kantian critical philosophy and Jamesian pragmatism. We must, Kant and James seem to agree, start from a reflexively *critical* analysis of our human situation, seeking to understand our finite and fragile condition as sharply and honestly as possible; only against that background of criticism can we pragmatically try to construct a better human world (epistemically and ethically).

For Kant, such a critical analysis shows that we are unable to know anything about things as they are in themselves (including theological issues such as the existence of God and human immortality) and that we are not by our nature good but desperately need the moral law set by our autonomous reason in its practical use.<sup>14</sup> For James, an analogous

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<sup>13</sup> I find Vanden Auweele's reading to be fundamentally in agreement with my own earlier work on Kantian "antitheodicy" (Kivistö and Pihlström 2016), though the actual theodicy discussion remains relatively brief in his book.

<sup>14</sup> An intriguing question (raised by one of the anonymous referees of this paper) is whether we should, according to Kant, nevertheless be able to know something about *ourselves* as "things in themselves" if we are able to know that we are not "by our nature" good, for instance (or, analogously, that our cognitive apparatus needs to use the categories). Whether the very idea of Kantian critical self-reflection of human



critical analysis starts from the impossibility of theodicies that would allegedly render suffering justified and from the framing of the very pragmatic method by the problem of evil, the recognition that there are real losses and real sorrows in human life, no matter how positively meaningful and flourishing our life could at best be (cf. Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5). Just as Kant's *Religionsschrift* (1983 [1793/1794]) begins with the well-known analysis of "radical evil" as a natural human inclination, James's *Pragmatism* (1975 [1907]) begins and ends with a discussion of the problem of evil and the rejection of theodicies.

It seems to me that James indeed does not go "around Kant" but right through him when it comes to a certain kind of pessimism about the human condition. This might sound like an implausible reading of a philosopher who wrote essays such as "The Energies of Men" and "Is Life Worth Living?" (both in James 1979 [1897]); however, the key idea is not that meliorism would be wrong but that it is based on a deeper pessimism. Moreover, the specific word is not essential – we definitely do not have to talk about "pessimism" at all – but the general commitment to something like anti-optimism and the rejection of any naïve "positive thinking" are what matters. Indeed, a kind of quasi-Jamesian moral "heroism" is precisely what is needed for the Kantian moral subject to overcome – even partially – the natural inclination to prioritize evil maxims instead of moral ones. Vanden Auweele (2019) rightly emphasizes throughout his book that from a Kantian point of view human nature has no inherent inclination to goodness but needs reason (the moral law) as its guidance. James may be slightly more optimistic about this specific matter, but he also argues that we need to be educated out of our instinctive blindness and deafness. For James, such education takes place through the employment of the pragmatic method taking seriously the potential practical results of our ideas, a method framed by an antitheodistic understanding of the problem of evil: neither Hegelian nor Leibnizian attempts to render unnecessary suffering meaningful in a transcendent sense are, for James, humanly acceptable, as they disregard the concrete experience of the victims of evil and suffering (cf. James 1975 [1907], Lecture I).

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reason needs some kind of access to our own nature at the level of things in themselves, after all, is a problem I must leave open here.

We should thus follow James (*ibid.*, Lecture VIII) in viewing pragmatism as proposing a form of meliorism reducible neither to naively optimistic views according to which the good will ultimately inevitably prevail nor to dark and cynical pessimism according to which everything will finally go down the road of destruction.<sup>15</sup> Pragmatism generally mediates between a number of implausible philosophical extremes (including strong realism and idealism as well as the tough-minded and tender-minded “temperaments”),<sup>16</sup> and similarly Kant’s transcendental philosophy mediates between (again) realism and idealism as well as, say, rationalism and empiricism and dogmatism and skepticism. The mediating role played by meliorism is part and parcel of the more general pragmatist-cum-Kantian picture of the human being. This is how James characterizes pragmatism’s commitment to meliorism:

Now it would contradict the very spirit of life to say that our minds must be indifferent and neutral in questions like that of the world’s salvation. Anyone who pretends to be neutral writes himself down here as a fool and a sham. [...] Nevertheless there are unhappy men who think the salvation of the world impossible. Theirs is the doctrine known as pessimism.

Optimism in turn would be the doctrine that thinks the world’s salvation inevitable.

Midway between the two there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism [...]. Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become.

It is clear that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism. (*Ibid.*, 137.)

Earlier in the same volume, James contrasts meliorism with determinism, because the latter claims that “necessity and impossibility between them rule the destinies of the world”, while the former “holds up improvement as at least possible” (*ibid.*, 61). Pragmatism figures as a pluralistic philosophy of promise and hope, refusing to take

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<sup>15</sup> Excellent relatively recent discussions of James’s meliorism can be found in commentaries such as Marchetti 2015 and Campbell 2017; see also several relevant essays in Goodson 2018.

<sup>16</sup> I have discussed this mediating role of pragmatism on a number of earlier occasions, e.g., Pihlström 2008, 2013.

“salvation” for granted (like dogmatic religious outlooks optimistically tend to do), nor claiming it to be impossible (as materialist and determinist views hopelessly pessimistically do, with their bleak picture of an ultimately inhuman universe), but the fact that such a promise is needed in the first place follows from our highly insecure, vulnerable, and both epistemically and ethically incomplete human condition.

In particular, sincerely understanding this incompleteness is essential in our ethical relations to other human beings around us. More specifically, James’s (1983 [1899]) well-known examination of “a certain blindness in human beings”, as an inclination or tendency to overlook the significance of otherness and other human beings’ distinctive points of view that might make *their* lives meaningful in ways we cannot easily understand, is analogous (or even James’s own version of) Kant’s treatment of “radical evil”, which is also an inclination (*Hang*), i.e., the tendency rooted in us to choose maxims contrary to the moral law – an inclination to evil (*Hang zum Böse*). These notions reflect the two philosophers’ fundamental agreement about transcendental pessimism. According to both, we need to be educated out of these inclinations. This happens, in Kant, primarily by the practical use of reason (which ultimately leads to religion, as we will note below), and in James by an engagement in holistic practices more generally (that is, not merely reason-use as such), religious practices included. Both are versions of the idea that human beings need to be *enculturated* in order for them to be able to be moral – to adopt a “strenuous mood”, as James memorably put it. Pessimism and meliorism work together here, as it is only on the grounds of pessimism that the melioristic project of making the world – especially human beings – better makes sense. This ultimately amounts to a thoroughly pragmatic philosophical anthropology.

Without appreciating a basic vulnerability in the lives we share with other human beings, no “cries of the wounded”<sup>17</sup> can be heard, and no pragmatic method can get off the ground. Therefore, James’s physiological metaphors of human finitude should be taken seriously as fundamental to his pragmatism: he finds both *deafness* (to what he calls the cries of the wounded) and *blindness* (to others’ experiences in general) significant to his analysis of our responses – or, better, failing responses – to vulnerability and suffering.

<sup>17</sup> On this key Jamesian notion, see, for further discussion, Putnam and Putnam 2017, as well as Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 5.

In an opening comment to the 1899 “blindness” lecture, he notes: “Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.” (James 1983 [1899].) Similarly, the human being, according to Kant (1983 [1793/1794], 6:32), “is by nature evil”, and this fact about our condition manifests itself in our disregard for moral duty when it comes to our natural pursuit of happiness.

It must be noted, however, that there are also important divergences between Kant’s and James’s distinctive accounts of our inclinations to evil. For Kant, radical evil is not merely the empirical tendency to prioritize one’s own happiness, well-being, or personal needs and interests in contrast to the moral law (though this is of course something we have a tendency to do, according to Kant); it is, more strongly, our *free choice* of maxims that prioritize happiness to moral law, that is, our tendency to freely choose to follow maxims that conflict with the categorical imperative. Our autonomous reason is self-divided here. It is crucially important for Kant that we are *responsible* for these choices and prioritizations and that *we* are therefore, indeed, “radically” evil (“at the root”, recalling the Latin etymology of *radix*); the unhappy choice arises from ourselves. Ultimately, our tendency to freely choose to be evil in this sense is as inexplicable and incomprehensible as our acting (when morally good) out of pure respect for the moral law as moral subjects (see *ibid.*, Book I).<sup>18</sup>

### **Kantian pessimism**

It is, arguably, precisely due to the “radical” character of evil (in the etymological sense of *radix*) that human beings are unable to achieve by their own efforts what Kant in the second *Critique* (1783 [1788]) called the highest good (*summum bonum*); in this pursuit commanded by the moral law itself (and thus by our practical reason), we seem to need, in addition to our autonomous reason, something like divine grace, and we need to be able to *legitimately hope* that we might deserve such grace on the basis of our moral commitment. James (1979 [1909]) revisits an essentially similar idea when he advances pragmatism as a pluralistic philosophy of hope, insisting that we need to do our best in the effort of “moral

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Bernstein 2002, chapter 1. Furthermore, in Pihlström 2014, chapter 1, I suggest that we might understand Kant’s notion of radical evil in terms of Charles S. Peirce’s metaphysics of “real generals”, such as habits and dispositions; the extent to which this realistic Peircean account is compatible with James’s somewhat more nominalistic pragmatism (cf. Pihlström 2009) is another matter and cannot be discussed here.

salvation” while at the same time trusting that other (superhuman) agents will do their best, too.<sup>19</sup>

We should, however, now take a slightly closer look at the way in which pessimism figures in Kant’s practical philosophy and philosophy of religion, in particular. Here I will help myself to Vanden Auweele’s insightful reading. He defines “Kantian pessimism” as a view emphasizing “*the lack of any capacity for human nature to be or navigate toward moral goodness*”, entailing that “*human nature requires a radical revolution through means exceeding that nature*” (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. xvi; see also p. 65), and he strikingly suggests that pessimism is not merely a part of Kant’s philosophy but is present “in the whole of his philosophy” (ibid., p. xviii). In some more detail, he summarizes Kantian pessimism as the conjunction of three theses. First, human nature (or natural processes generally) “do by themselves not facilitate moral goodness”; indeed, there is “something profoundly amiss with human nature”. Secondly, therefore, our development toward goodness “must include a radical change”; in terms of the *radix* etymology, again, human nature needs to be “altered from the ground up”, not merely trained or reformed. Thirdly, Kant espouses a skeptical view about our actually being able to reach the highest good. (Ibid.) The human being simply does not have a “holy will” that would not experience a conflict between moral duty and natural inclination (ibid., pp. 44-45, 51). This seems to be a similar kind of transcendental anthropological “fact” about us as, say, our not possessing the faculty of “intellectual intuition” that would know its objects directly without the mediating role of the senses (as analyzed in the Transcendental Aesthetic of the first *Critique*).<sup>20</sup>

Note, however, how close Kant’s pessimism comes to Jamesian meliorism. As Vanden Auweele puts it, this pessimism “does not cancel out the possibility of a better future, but warns against the belief that natural processes by themselves navigate toward that end. Progress is hard and difficult, not inevitable.” (Ibid., p. xx.) What is required is “moral education that cultivates and augments [our] rational interest in moral behavior”

<sup>19</sup> In the *Religionsschrift*, Kant also mentions “supernatural cooperation” (1983 [1793/1794], 6:44).

<sup>20</sup> Vanden Auweele (2019, p. 109) in my view aptly characterizes the propensity to evil as “an anthropological idea of a transcendental nature, meaning it applies universally to human beings but is contingent to their nature”. Analogously, human finitude and mortality can be claimed to be “transcendental anthropological” features of human existence (Pihlström 2016). Whether there is a sense in which these concern us *qua* things in themselves (cf. note 14 above) cannot be settled here, though.

(ibid., p. 20). Accordingly, just as the Jamesian meliorist may still have confidence (however meager) in the possibility of a better outcome, or “moral salvation” of the world (for which the assistance of “higher powers” may be needed), the Kantian pessimist does not claim human beings to be “necessarily corrupted” but only “naturally corrupted” (ibid., p. 101; cf. pp. 109, 116): the *Hang zum Böse* rooted in us does not make morality impossible for us but only very difficult. Otherwise the very pursuit of moral goodness (a pursuit we have a duty to engage in) would become an incoherent requirement. Moral virtue must still be a human possibility; our nature cannot be so thoroughly (necessarily, unavoidably) corrupted by our propensity to evil that we could not even *aim* at being morally good – to even occasionally occupy what James called the “strenuous mood”.<sup>21</sup> The possibility of moral goodness in this sense only concerns human beings, because neither angels (who would possess a “holy will”) nor mere animals would be able to act virtuously due to a conflict between duty and inclination.

Another potential comparison to James would also be highly natural here: perhaps our way to goodness is something that only opens through a radical *conversion* (see the relevant sections on conversion in James 1985 [1902], Lectures IX-X). At least in Kant’s view, no minor adjustments are sufficient, but human nature needs to be “radically sculpted” to “overhaul” its natural behavior (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 65); what is needed is a “dramatically changed second nature”. While this kind of radical moral education is difficult, Kant is not a thoroughgoing or absolute pessimist in the sense that he would deny its possibility. James’s position may also be seen as cautious if not skeptical regarding our ability to achieve the highest good – or “moral salvation”, as James calls it – as it is not easy for us to overcome the blindness that comes naturally to us. Moreover, we may note that just as radical evil and moral blindness are analogous notions in these two thinkers, so are the ethico-religiously central concepts of the highest good and the moral salvation of the world.<sup>22</sup> While Kant urges us to be committed to moral duty despite its difficulty, James offers us an uncertain universe with responsibility:

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<sup>21</sup> The second and third book (*Stücke*) of the *Religionsschrift* can, I think, be read as an extended argument concerning the way in which the good can nevertheless overcome our evil propensity – but not without religion. In James, too, the hope for moral salvation is inextricably tied up with his defense of the possibility or even pragmatic necessity of adopting a religious outlook.

<sup>22</sup> It might be suggested that the Jamesian idea of “moral salvation” comes close to Kant’s hope that “the world must be moralized” (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 126).

It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of a universe from which the element of ‘seriousness’ is not to be expelled. Whoso does is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist. He is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames. (James 1975 [1907], pp. 142-143.)

For James, this “trust” may also be directed, religiously, at “superhuman forces” that may assist us in advancing the moral ideal of salvation (*ibid.*, p. 143). In the Kantian context, a “conversion” to moral seriousness despite the uncertainty of our condition is, however, primarily a rational and ethical one. Because our human nature does not possess the tools to reach moral goodness, we require “the intervention of reason that radically remodels nature” (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 5). This ultimately leads to religion (see also below), but we cannot hope to just volitionally adopt a religious faith because of its beneficial effects in our moral pursuits; as Vanden Auweele notes (*ibid.*, p. 23), Kant rejects Pascal’s Wager as firmly as James (1979 [1897], chapter 1) does.<sup>23</sup> Yet, we do need actively embraced human faith in order to direct our behavior from what we merely naturally are to what ethical duty – in our “strenuous mood” – requires. Insofar as the key to Kant’s pessimism is our inability to be naturally good (that is, our inclination to evil instead of moral virtue), for James the fundamental problem seems to be that the very possibility of morality is endangered by the fact that we appear to be living in a material world devoid of any higher meaning and value, if the scientific account of the world is on the right track. For both, we need to overcome our nature and become fully human – and this is itself an irreducibly ethical quest.

While Vanden Auweele does not explicitly speak about transcendental pessimism (or meliorism, for that matter), his reading of Kant fits very well my attempt to reconcile transcendental pessimism with empirical meliorism. He notes that “the rationally justified hope for a future in which humanity is set right shines so powerfully that one is blinded to the darkness it is supposed to cover up” (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 22). Rational hope does shine, but we can only notice it against the pessimistic darkness around it. Again, the same holds for James’s melioristic conviction that things *can* be made better while success is never guaranteed.

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<sup>23</sup> On the similarities between Kant’s practical postulation of God and James’s “will to believe” idea, see, however, Pihlström 2013.

There is no need to here dwell on the way in which Kant (1983 [1791]) in his “Theodicy Essay” firmly rejects all actual and possible (e.g., Leibnizian metaphysically optimist) theodicies allegedly rendering evil and suffering (or “counterpurposiveness”, *Zweckwidrigkeit*) meaningful and (in some sense) purposeful.<sup>24</sup> It suffices to observe here that *antitheodicism* (as I like to call it) is an essential element of Kant’s pessimism. There is no way in which we could by our limited rational resources justify the evil and suffering we find around us in the world we live in; moreover, it can be suggested that our moral duty to treat other human beings not merely as means but also as ends (according to the second formulation of the categorical imperative) would have to preclude the instrumentalizing tendencies of theodicies, i.e., the temptation to see others’ suffering as a means to some imagined higher end.

No rationalist dogmatic faith in a harmonious divine plan rendering all counterpurposiveness ultimately purposeful can thus be humanly accepted, because it is in the end a form of the “blindness” James criticized, though not exactly in the same sense. It is a form of blindness (and deafness) due to its inability to appreciate the experience of utter meaninglessness in suffering. In this antitheodicism, Kant and James stand united.<sup>25</sup>

### **Ethics and religion**

As was already remarked above, the Jamesian pragmatic postulation of God’s existence – based on a “will to believe” leap (cf. James 1979 [1897]) – resembles the Kantian rationally legitimate hope for God’s existence as a “postulate of practical reason”. This leap, or hope, is necessary for us (given the kind of beings we are, and given the pessimism sketched above), because otherwise we cannot be fully committed to the requirements of morality. It is, thus, for melioristic reasons that we need to take the “will to believe” step toward practically postulating a Kantian divinity that (we may hope) can ultimately guarantee justice as the harmony of virtue and happiness, though, given our pessimistic condition, we can never know for sure anything about such an outcome.

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<sup>24</sup> Vanden Auweele’s (2019, pp. 7-10) brief discussion of this issue is solid, though it fails to deal with Kant’s very interesting reading of the Book of Job – a serious omission in my view (cf. Kivistö and Pihlström 2016, chapter 2). Kant’s account of that ancient text arguably sets the tone for a number of more recent, and very different, antitheodacist projects, including James’s.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this topic, see my previous engagements with the theodicy issue and antitheodicism, including Pihlström 2013, 2014, 2020; Kivistö and Pihlström 2016.



On the basis of the considerations of meliorism and pessimism, it is possible to further deepen our comparison between Kant and James by noting how closely similar their ways of subordinating religion to morality are. It is through religion – to which our reason in its limited condition brings us – that our blindness and our propensity to evil may be (partially, temporarily) overcome and the moral pursuit strenuously advanced – to the extent that we may (again) follow Vanden Auweele’s (2019, pp. 131, 173) suggestion according to which Kant’s philosophy of religion is “an integral part of practical philosophy by making religion into a tool for cultivating moral resolve”, and the functions of religion are to be subordinated to the ethical one. They are also to be subordinated to ethics according to James as well.

An obvious question that arises here is how *sincerely* a morally motivated religious believer can adopt religious faith, knowing that it ultimately only plays an instrumental role for advancing ethical rather than religious ends. This is a question that comes up as clearly in the Kantian context (see *ibid.*, chapter 6) as in the Jamesian one (see Pihlström 2008, chapter 2; 2013, chapter 1). If religion is only, or even primarily, intended to help us adopt the strenuous mood and pursue moral ends that ought to motivate and bind us independently of religion, does it have any autonomous or even any genuine role to play in our lives? If we were fully conscious of the primarily (or exclusively) ethical function of religion, this would be “the end of religion”; a truly Kantian form of Christianity would, rather, have to be embraced without our being aware of its essentially serving our “moral courage” (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 191). This is how Vanden Auweele formulates the worry:

Religions can only achieve its [*sic*] function, that is, to cultivate moral resolve, if they are taken to be true, not if they are adopted because it is prudent to adopt a religion. One believes in Christianity because one thinks Christianity is true, not because one thinks Christianity would be prudent to believe in (this would make for a hypocritical believer). (*Ibid.*, p. 192.)

In other words, the morally instrumental function of religion is problematic for the sincerity of religious faith. “Instrumental belief is not real belief” (*ibid.*, p. 193), and therefore our realizing the “practical usefulness” of religious belief would destroy that belief *qua* religious. As was already noted above, Kant just like James later rejected

Pascal's Wager, which (at least according to a received view)<sup>26</sup> proposes to infer the rationality of religious faith from the beneficial outcome of that faith (and from the fact that its probability, however small, is not zero).

This "sincerity objection", as we might call it, is arguably a worry that can be raised with full force only in the context of the kind of Kantian-cum-Jamesian pessimism-cum-meliorism that has been sketched above. We may be persuaded by Kantian and Jamesian arguments that religion is necessarily, at least in the sense of practical necessity, needed for us to be able to overcome our instinctive blindness and/or our natural inclination to prioritize evil maxims. It is only a short step from this insight to the conclusion that this is *all* religion is ever needed for. Could religious faith, then, even turn into a kind of *placebo* therapy that we know "works" but not because there is a "real" objective mechanism there but because such a motivating force tends to be effective for beings like us with our cognitive and ethical condition, including our limitations? At least it would seem that for a *placebo* effect to be real we cannot know that the therapy involved really has no efficient power. Paradoxically, for our being able to effectively "use" religion as a "tool" for our moral resolve, we must *not* know, or perhaps not even be able to know, that it is "merely" such a tool. We must, in some sense, be able to be sincerely committed to religion without having climbed onto a reflective meta-level affirming the moral value of such commitment – yet this sincerity itself must arise from our ethical stance toward religion.

It is, it seems to me, essentially the same kind of sincerity that Kant emphasizes when he rejects theodicies in the Theodicy Essay and that he also praises in an eloquent footnote toward the end of the *Religionsschrift*. This is, indeed, what Kant finds the most striking feature in Job's character in contrast to Job's "friends" (who seek to formulate theodicies, in contemporary parlance).<sup>27</sup> More precisely, Job's key virtues,

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<sup>26</sup> I am not saying that there could not be a reading of Pascal's Wager that would bring it somewhat closer to either Kant's or James's view, or both. I am not taking any stand on the interpretation of Pascal here.

<sup>27</sup> While I have in this essay relied heavily on Vanden Auweele's in my view excellent account of Kantian pessimism, which includes the rejection of theodicies (as manifestations of a kind of misdirected theological optimism), Vanden Auweele curiously neglects Kant's very important engagement with the Book of Job (which is the starting point for the entire antitheodistic inquiry in Kivistö and Pihlström 2016). He (Vanden Auweele 2019, p. 193) does draw attention to Kant's praise of sincerity in *Religionsschrift*, though. This is what Kant says: "*O Aufrichtigkeit!* du Asträa, die du von der Erde zum Himmel entflohen bist, wie zieht man dich (die Grundlage des Gewissens, mithin aller inneren Religion) von da zu uns wieder herab? [...] Aber *Aufrichtigkeit* (dass alles, was man sagt, mit Wahrhaftigkeit gesagt sei) muss man von jedem Menschen

according to Kant, are his “sincerity of heart” (*Aufrichtigkeit des Herzens*) and “honesty in openly admitting one’s doubts” (*die Redlichkeit, seine Zweifel unverhohlen zu gestehen*), which establishes “the preeminence of the honest man over the religious flatterer [*Schmeichler*] in the divine verdict” (Kant 1983 [1791], 8:267):

Job speaks as he thinks, and with the courage with which he, as well as every human being in his position, can well afford; his friends, on the contrary, speak as if they were being secretly listened to by the mighty one, over whose cause they are passing judgment, and as if gaining his favor through their judgment were closer to their heart than the truth. Their malice in pretending to assert things into which they yet must admit they have no insight, and in simulating a conviction which they in fact do not have, contrasts with Job’s frankness [*Freimütigkeit*] [...]. (Ibid., 8:265-266)

At this point it might be suggested that the Kantian prospective believer actually needs Jamesian meliorism to overcome the pessimism that now extends to our ability to invoke religious considerations in any serious and sincere sense in this context. Within the Kantian system itself, the sincerity of religion may indeed be lost, as Vanden Auweele correctly worries. In brief, it may be suggested that from a pragmatic point of view our sincere faith may itself bring its own verification along with it – and this is something that seems to be available to James but not (at least not fully) to Kant. This would be an example of a case in which the employment of the Jamesian “will to believe” strategy is pragmatically legitimate; after all, one of the types of cases that James (1979 [1897]) considers in “The Will to Believe” is precisely the case where strong belief is required for the belief itself to be able to be (made) true.

However, even here (at least when we are examining the religious case) it seems that we do need to make sure the faith that is to be voluntarily embraced *is* sincere to begin with. It cannot be – any more in the Kantian than in the Jamesian situation – adopted *merely* for instrumental reasons or on purely practical and functional grounds due to results or benefits that would be external to it. Its moral worth needs to be something that sincere faith “internally” (inherently) carries with it, even if the contingent outcome were not to be

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fordern können, und, wenn auch selbst dazu keine Anlage in unserer Natur wäre, deren Kultur nur vernachlässigt wird, so würde die Menschenrasse in ihren eigenen Augen ein Gegenstand der tiefsten Verachtung sein müssen.” (Kant 1983 [1793/1974], 6:190n.)

realized, after all. Only by adopting *such* a pragmatic faith in God's reality can the potential pragmatic Kantian be both genuinely religious and genuinely ethical.

From the Jamesian pragmatist point of view, it could even be suggested that the "truth" of religion pragmatically amounts to its ethical functionality in our lives. That is to say, Vanden Auweele and many others who fail to approach the Kantian issue of sincerity from the Jamesian pragmatist standpoint rely on an essentially non-pragmatic dichotomy between the issues concerning the theoretical truth (vs. falsity) of religion, on the one hand, and the practical usefulness or functionality of religion, on the other hand. If we frame our examination of the relation between religion and ethics in a thoroughly pragmatist manner, this dichotomy must itself be overcome. The practical – i.e., ethical – functionality of religion is constitutive of its pragmatic truth, or in other words, the theoretical "metaphysical" truth of a religious outlook *is* its pragmatic functionality in the (would-be) believer's system of belief, which is ultimately their (form of) life in a holistic sense.<sup>28</sup> Pragmatism, after all, is for James a "philosophy of hope", but this notion of hope must not be contrasted to Kant's but rather be understood as fully congruous with Kant's treatment of religion in terms of legitimate rational hope.

It will inevitably remain an open issue here whether Jamesian pragmatism can ultimately keep its promise of delivering a melioristic account of religion that does not rely on a dichotomy between ethical or pragmatic and purely theoretical truth but can, rather, resolve the question of sincerity that seems to arise in the Kantian context which proposes to account for religion in terms of practical reason. The main conclusion for us (for now) is that it is right here that Kant and James are deeply engaged with essentially the same problem. In my view, Kantian practical (moral) theism needs to be informed by Jamesian pragmatist considerations in order for the sincerity issue to be adequately dealt with. But in the context of the present inquiry this remains a mere hypothesis to be further critically tested by means of both historical and systematic investigation. It could, for instance, turn out that from Kant's perspective there is a sense in which a religious attitude

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<sup>28</sup> At this point, a comparison between the Kantian-cum-Jamesian position formulated here and the Wittgensteinian tradition in the philosophy of religion naturally invites itself (cf. also Pihlström 2013).

“comes first”, after all, and the critical account of the moral grounds of religion only gives a voice to those who already have religious faith.<sup>29</sup>

It is, at any rate, an essential element of Kantian-cum-Jamesian sincerity that naïve optimism is rejected across the board, both in ethics and in religion. Therefore, the sincerity needed in the formulation of a properly Kantian (and Jamesian) religious faith is essentially the same sincerity that we need for the rejection of theodicies, along the lines of Kant’s Theodicy Essay, and therefore the kind of pessimism briefly analyzed above is a key element of such sincerity. Only by taking others’ meaningless and non-instrumentalizable suffering philosophically – ethically – seriously can we hope to formulate anything like an adequate account of morality and religion; overcoming theodicies is, indeed, part of overcoming the “blindness” James was (sincerely) worried about.

### Conclusion: humanism and critical philosophy

It is impossible to defend the transcendently pessimistic conception of humanity (as articulated above) without a fundamental commitment to what Kant called *critical philosophy*. The chief task of philosophical inquiry is always critical.<sup>30</sup> Critical philosophy, broadly understood, integrates the Kantian pursuit of reason and the Jamesian pursuit of the holistic and pluralistic development of “the whole man in us”. It is (only) through critical philosophy that we can establish methods of conversion that might (but also might not) lead to moral goodness and progress.<sup>31</sup> It is, moreover, (only) through critical philosophy that we become aware of the kind of pessimism we need to be committed to in order to sincerely understand our human condition, especially the Kantian inclination to

<sup>29</sup> This was interestingly, though controversially, proposed by one of the anonymous reviewers. If such a reading were to be developed, then Kant’s critical views on the relation between ethics and religion might, as the reviewer suggests, be usefully read against the background of the pre-critical essay, “Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes” (Kant 1983 [1763]). Furthermore, as the other anonymous reviewer notes, there might be resources available within the Kantian position itself for a view supplementary to the pragmatist response to the sincerity issue, i.e., an account explaining how religion could provide a “primitive essentially non-conceptual” (or “moral-intuitional”) “grasp of absolute non-instrumental value that cannot be rationally secured otherwise”. Again, I must leave these suggestions open here.

<sup>30</sup> Note also that among the pragmatists, John Dewey defined philosophy as “the critical method of developing methods of criticism”; see the closing comments in Dewey 1986 [1929], p. 354.

<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, such a critical inquiry into our human condition could utilize Kantian sources I have not been able to analyze in this essay (especially pertaining to Kant’s philosophy of history), such as “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlichen Absicht” (Kant 1983 [1784]) and perhaps also “Das Ende aller Dinge” (Kant 1983 [1794]).

evil and the Jamesian instinctive blindness. For the uncritical (naïve) gaze, these unwelcome features of our existence are not visible. In a more pragmatist terminology, we need a genuine – again sincere – commitment to *inquiry*, also in ethical and theological matters.

To engage in critical philosophy – or pragmatic inquiry – in pursuit of the kind of melioristic account based on the background of pessimism is, moreover, to be committed to a Kantian-cum-Jamesian *humanism*, in contrast to various currently popular transhumanist, posthumanist, or antihumanist ways of thinking. The inquiring subject that critically turns toward a reflection on their own capacities and limitations is a human being. The question “What is man?” indeed integrates all the three Kantian questions. James, we may conclude, essentially shares Kant’s humanistic conception of the human being; to be a pessimist, or a meliorist, is to be a humanist seriously, and often painfully, concerned with the human condition.<sup>32</sup>

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